

Short Story Excerpt

IN THE SKY LORD by Mary Troy

Because she'd paid attention for at least some of her forty-four and two-thirds years, Belinda Carswell had what the black-robed authorities of her past would call a belief system. She did not believe anyone had to be down for long, much less forever. She did not believe in a god of any kind, but knew the one most people claimed to believe in was vindictive and scary, choosing favorites for no reason. She believed she had failed often, mainly by not being good enough, by not pitching in, by plain old laziness—what her Catholic parents and the priests they listened to would call sins of omission. She believed in luck—it was what had kept her from being down for long—and she also believed nothing was inconsequential. So when the girl singer showed up and chose to stay, giving Belinda no real say in the matter, Belinda called it significant, maybe even luck.

It happened this way. Belinda was a neighborhood evaluator, a job she had created after being fired from the frame factory ten months earlier. She'd ordered stationery that said she was a certified neighborhood evaluator, though there was no board or person to provide any such assurance. She began by advertising herself through realtors, and after ten months was still the only neighborhood evaluator listed in the Metropolitan St. Louis yellow pages. She soon had enough business that she could feed herself, could pay her bills, and could have a new roof put on the tiny bungalow she'd inherited from her second husband. But the easing of her money worries came with insomnia, and her bedroom at night was filled with all those bosses and teachers she'd disappointed, her parents, her ex-husbands and their families, impressing her by their

numbers, showing her that many people had passed through her life but none had stayed. In the beginning, their frowning faces drove her into the living room and the refuge of late night TV.

She first saw the girl singer at 2:30 AM on a local evangelists' cable channel. The girl mutilated "May The Circle Be Unbroken." She panted out the words, pausing too long at the ends of phrases to gulp air. Belinda saw the girl early the next morning, and the next. She did "May The Circle Be Unbroken" each time. After every rendition, the evangelist's teen-aged son who got the late night shift applauded vigorously in the otherwise empty studio and talked to her. Her name was April May. Her face was meaty and her glasses magnified her dripping eyes. Her blond hair was stringy, stuck flat against her head. It was impossible to guess her age.

"What do you need, Sister April May?" the evangelist's son asked on the third morning, his voice cracking.

The camera moved in so April May's face filled the television screen. "God's grace and \$148.74 for my light bill. It's about to be shut off."

"Silly Twit," Belinda said to the fat, damp face. "Use your mind, your wits. Anybody can get enough money." Belinda herself had close to a thousand in reserve for her own comfort. She'd lived from month to month on occasion, and doing so gave her stomach pains and shaky hands. She needed to know she had a reserve that would cover food and utilities for a few months just in case.

"Can you do the Circle song once more?" the evangelist's son asked. "It is a comfort."

“Shit.” Belinda stood up and dialed the station. By the time the evangelist’s son answered, April May was on the part she had the most trouble with, “In the sky, Lord, in the sky.” She tried to give the word *lord* two syllables, but lost her rhythm each time. “I’ll pay that fat girl’s electric bill if she’ll just shut up,” Belinda said. “Don’t let her sing anything ever again.”